

# Hoogstra led Christian higher ed through decade of change

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—After 10 years of leading the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, Shirley Hoogstra has a new title: president emerita.

One of her last tasks as president involved her frequent role as a speaker in a higher education setting.



Randy O’Rear presents Shirley V. Hoogstra, J.D., 7th president of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, with a Distinguished Service Award for her many years of service to Christian higher education. (UMHB Photo)

“You often don’t know what God is up to until later,” Hoogstra recalled saying at the recent convocation for a new class at Michigan’s Handlon Correctional Facility that was participating in a program of Calvin University.

“And I said to the inmates: ‘Pay attention. This particular opportunity to be a college graduate may be something that in your rearview mirror turns out to be very clear that God had a particular purpose in giving you this opportunity.’”



Shirley V. Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, received an honorary doctorate from Dallas Baptist University. She is pictured with DBU President Adam C. Wright. (DBU Photo)

In an Oct. 2 interview in the building housing the new headquarters of the Christian college association, Hoogstra said she looks back herself and sees how her former career as a Connecticut law firm partner prepared her to lead CCCU through a decade of high-profile religious freedom fights around LGBTQ rights on campuses.

Hoogstra, who has been succeeded by David A. Hoag, former president of Warner University in Florida, said she has “no regrets” about her shift from litigator to aiding 180 CCCU member institutions worldwide as they pivoted to hybrid classes and continue to determine effective ways to finance education and encourage the faith of their students.



Shirley Hoogstra speaks at Dallas Baptist University. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Hoogstra, who is in her 60s, spoke with RNS about leading CCCU over the last decade, supporting diverse leadership in Christian education and increasing interfaith dialogue among officials of faith-based colleges and universities.

The interview was edited for length and clarity.

## **How is the period of transition going as you work with your successor, David Hoag, before retiring on Oct. 31?**

Well, of course, you don't get a playbook for these things. Early on in the year of 2023 I proposed a formal three-month transition period. I thought I would remain the president during those three months, and (my successor) would be president-elect. But on the day of Dr. Hoag's appointment, July 7, I realized no, we need to have him step into the president role after 30 days, and then I'll be president emerita. Two salaries, right? The board approved that budget.

David has already made good changes in terms of meeting structures and new promotions. But we're walking side by side in meetings, before and after meetings, and I am able to give him play-by-play insights and play-by-play conversations as they are in real time.

## **You have overseen a decade of leadership for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. How would you sum up the state of Christian higher education, especially in North America?**

Christian higher education is a growing sector because Christian higher education has a distinctive, which is the education with a moral compass. It's also growing, because there's been a huge equalizing effect amongst colleges and universities.

With the internet and with people offering online, in-person, graduate, undergraduate, parents and students have lost the need for the hierarchy of institutions generally, unless it's maybe the top 10, and are now going for fit. So families of faith or students who want a particular major or minor or student experience feel freer to pick a campus that matches their values.

**Is there any specific action CCCU has taken since an appeals court in August upheld the *Hunter v. U.S. Department of Education* decision in a lower court that dismissed claims by LGBTQ students? They unsuccessfully sought removal of a religious exemption in Title IX gender discrimination rules for federally funded religious institutions.**

The Title IX exemption is more secure today than it's ever been. The importance of the case cannot be understated. This was a unanimous decision, and the decision found that the Title IX exemption is fully constitutional. The plaintiffs in this case may, in fact, try to get a further review in the 9th Circuit. We are hopeful that, because it was a unanimous decision, they will not take it up for review.

**Do you consider this one of the successes of your time leading CCCU? And why or why not?**

Yes. It's a success. The Title IX exemption, which allows religious institutions—Christian colleges and universities prime among them—to live according to their mission, is a cornerstone of our work. And the CCCU, under my leadership, has had a three-part strategy. We had the court strategy, where we have been a leading voice in amicus briefs around religious freedom. The second one was this legislative effort (leading to the 2022 Respect for Marriage Act) where we have basically been part of changing the dynamic of a both/and approach: If you're going to do LGBTQ civil rights, you've got to do religious freedom. And then this is an executive branch strategy. And in the executive branch, the Title IX exemption and other religious exemptions found in other titles allow the day-to-day operation to go unimpeded.

**There have been, it appears, some CCCU member institutions that have been caught between conservative stakeholders, like parents and donors, and faculty who've expressed support for gay marriage or been accused of being "woke." How does CCCU advise or take a role in those situations?**

CCCU does not advise campuses on HR matters. And the cases that happen always have more to the story than is ever revealed in newspaper articles. That being said, the CCCU has been long on the record about saying that diverse views in classroom situations are important.

Compared to other private higher education institutions, we have more diverse conversations and more and different perspectives are more often raised in Christian college campuses than in secular campuses. So I think our campuses are doing a good job in making sure our students are prepared for world-class conversations.

**In the wake of the death of George Floyd, Christian colleges got pushback for statements about racial justice by critics who said prayers and panel discussions were not sufficient. At the time, you committed yourself to help keep the "next generation of leaders" from giving up the possibility of concrete actions. Are there ways CCCU and its institutions have sought to address concerns about diversity and inclusion?**

Yes, since George Floyd's murder, there has been an intentional effort to make sure leaders of color are fully supported in our Multi-ethnic Leadership Development Institute, a key support mechanism where leaders of color come together, talk about their situations, learn from peers and

come away refreshed and encouraged.

In our (quadrennial) 2022 International Forum, our speaker array reflected the CCCU's commitment to have voices of leaders of color on the plenary stage to make sure this could be a central conversation in the very important set of conversations following George Floyd's murder and the subsequent tragedies of other men and women of color.

**Since 2019, you have worked to bring together presidents and other leaders of colleges and universities who have a different faith perspective than CCCU, which is an evangelical organization. What have been some specific outcomes of those gatherings with leaders of institutions affiliated with Catholics, Mormons, Jews and Muslims?**

This ability to convene national voices with institutions that have common cause is one of the more significant successes of the CCCU in the last 10 years. Prior to 2014 there was an insider's approach to Christian education, and since 2015 there has been a larger aperture about finding partners and allies who believe faith matters in higher education.

One of our newest outgrowths of early panels, which happened at the (CCCU) Presidents Conference, is a new Commission on Faith-based Colleges and Universities out of the American Council on Education, where members across higher education can be part of a group that is thinking concretely about the value of religious education in America.

**What's ahead for you when your retirement officially begins on Oct. 31?**

I'm going to be writing the history of this decade at the CCCU. I am going to be doing some speaking and moderating of some conversations, which I

have loved doing since my role at “Inner Compass” (a public television series) at Calvin University years ago, and I would like to spend more time understanding how prison education can advance the Matthew 25 imperative: “When I was sick you looked after me and when I was in prison you came to visit me.”